

Firebird Nested in Darkness

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Verse One: Don't Fight an Agent

The Goblin rattled along the highway until, as the sun began to hit it's noon day high, Harley spotted a sign for a town named "Admiral's Warning" with a listed population of two hundred and forty one people. The town was tiny. If Marion closed his eyes for a brief rest he might literally blink and miss it as they passed through. A tiny commercial core of buildings around which a few small suburbs clustered and out from which a series of dirt roads radiated out leading to rural properties at the outskirts. Cattle grazed like a slow eyed watch dogs and the smell of manure became rapidly overpowering as they approached.

"That seems sleepy enough to be safe." Marion observed.

Harley agreed, "It sounds safe enough. I'll grab the exit and we'll gas up and food up there. To be safe, keep your distance from the locals though, but don't act like your trying to keep your distance."

"How do I do that?"

"I don't know, act natural."

The rock gradually faded from a ruddy ochre to a bleached bone white as Harley and Marion drove the Goblin into the town, although calling this empty desiccated collection of stores and dilapidated buildings a town would be generous. The town seemed like a corpse, drained by some architectural vampire and left to bleach in the white hot glare of the sun. As the Goblin clunkered through town, a few stray humans looked up from creaking porches and peered from over dusty blinds. The visible expressions were cut with lines and furrows that spoke of fear and mistrust.

"I can almost hear the banjoes playing." Harley said as he steered the Goblin down what passed for a main street, "Does the map have anything to say about where we can find a gas station. We need

supplies. Food and gas to start and then probably some decent camping and road side maintenance gear."

"Why all the stuff? Is something wrong with the Goblin?" Marion asked, "I thought he was lumbering pretty well today? I mean, he is the Goblin, but still I thought he was doing well."

"We're wanted for questioning. Perhaps wanted as suspects now. I turned off my cell phone completely so I can't check. You turned yours off too right?"

Marion nodded and Harley continued.

"We're being framed. The less contact we need to have with people who could turn us in, the better. There is nothing wrong with the Goblin, but the Goblin isn't know for it's longevity on the highway, and I don't want to be in a position of asking for help from passerbys and hoping they don't recognize us from the nightly news more time than necessary. I'd like to avoid hearing a police siren behind me if possible, and so we need supplies to minimize our need to interact with strangers."

There was a strange popping noise from the Goblin's engine and the van bounded a little in response, as though the ancient machine were either agreeing with or objecting to the boy's assessment of it's performance.

"It's okay boy," Marion said with a grin, "We trust you, you've been a good beast of burden and we're just talking about how to take care of you so you can keep going another thirty years."

"I don't think anything could give the Goblin another thirty years. I just want it to last long enough to get us as far as possible as quickly as we can manage."

"He doesn't mean that." Marion said, patting a torn green seat cover, "He loves you too."

"The Goblin has been a great tough old vehicle, but I will not anthropomorphize it."

Marion stuck his tongue out, "Either way, let's also minimize our interactions with the bad guys by turning left right now. Right Now! Turn Left!" Marion said, his voice rising as he pointed our a white van with two men in dark glasses and dark suits speaking into ear pieces beside the white van.

Harley cranked the wheel and turned, sharply, but smoothly onto the side street. The dominant colour for exterior walls in the town seemed to be taupe with a generous coating of white rock dust.

"Did they see us?" Marion acted.

"I don't think so. But this complicates matters. We have to go into silent running mode now and sneak around getting things done without any of them raising the alarm. Fantastic." Harley said, "How did they get here before us?"

"I don't know. I'm not even sure that they're real people, maybe they just possess people like in the Matrix?"

"I hope not. I like my villains to be a little more original than that."

"And here I was hoping that actually listening to the story would help improve my luck."

"Maybe this is an improvement." Harley said.

"Or maybe we're not doing the right thing yet."

"Okay, I want to hear what the map says about gas stations in this little town. Every time I think I've got the feel of the new music, things go all free jazz on me. " Harley said.

"What have you got against free jazz? The spirit of Pharaoh Sanders will rise from the grave to kick your butt if you keep doing that."

"Pharaoh Sanders isn't dead you know."

"Your blasphemies would kill him and he would rise from the grave in indignation.

"Pharaoh Sanders is a genius. He isn't the problem, the problem is people who think that they can be Pharaoh Sanders, and me having to listen to them."

"Weak excuses, too little and too late to stop the vengeance of the Pharaoh."

"That sounds like an old Hammer Film."

Marion grinned in spite of himself and scanned the map. Admiral's Warning was not a big settlement, but at least the place seemed to have been built for people who owned vehicles. Roads spun out in all directions, like spider webs spinning out from a hypothetical town centre

"There's only one gas station," Marion said, "And we have to go past the suits over there to reach it. But there are plenty of side streets, so we may be able to sneak around them. If we're lucky, which we aren't, then we can reach the gas station undetected and the gas station and the grocery store are attached, so it would be a one stop shop and then we can return to running like scared children."

"Listen to yourself. We aren't running like scared children," Harley said, "We just don't have any leads right now. Everything spins on those kids, and the number they called from was blocked. I can't dial them back. So we have to listen and hope that they call again. Until then, we have to stay free."

"That makes us seem so much better than how I was thinking about our situation." Marion said.

"That's my job. I'm the stable one."

"I thought I was the stable one."

"No, you're the adorably befuddled one, that I keep out of trouble."

"So what are you saying exactly?"

"That I'm really bad at my job apparently. No sense stalling. You direct me, and we'll try to sneak around them."

"That way." Marion pointed ahead at a smaller side road named Lowe Street, and Harley directed the Goblin down the street. The two tried to get to the gas station, but every turn led them to a white unmarked van parked between them and the gas station. After nearly an hour of frustrated circling, they gave up.

"Our gas isn't bad just yet," Marion offered, "We could just keep going and try again later."

"I want supplies before I need them." Harley countered, "Not after I need them. We can go on foot, sneak through yards and get to the grocery store. At least then we have some of what we need."

They parked the Goblin on a quiet residential side street and began making their way through weed filled lanes between the homes, slowly working their way towards the grocery store. When they finally got within sight of the building, they could clearly see five men in dark glasses and dark suits standing spread out across the parking lot.

Harley shook his head, "They know what we would need if we stopped here. There are probably more inside. We should just go. I should have listened to you. I made a bad choice here."

Marion didn't argue, and the two slipped back towards the Goblin. However, upon getting within sight of the Goblin they immediately spotted two agents with fingers pressed to ear pieces standing beside the van talking to the open air.

"Harley," Marion said quietly, "I am definitely still not lucky, and it appears to be contagious."

Harley and Marion crouched in the wild grasses growing between two yards at the edge of the road where the Goblin was parked. The two agents quickly were joined by nearly a dozen other agents. The agents quickly used a pry bar to open the back doors to aging cricket Van and agents swarmed in as the air hummed with radio crackle and conversation.

"Now what?" Marion asked.

"The longer they have access to the Goblin, the worse things are for us. We can't hear what they're saying, but I assume that none of it is good."

"We could leave the Goblin, and steal a car." Marion offered.

"I can't pick a lock and I can't hot wire a car, can you?"

"No. I can't"

"So we need the Goblin back and fast. We need a distraction to draw them off, so we can get back and make a run for it."

Marion raised his eyebrows, "This seems like a reasonable plan to you? I thought you were the stable one."

"This seems like the most reasonable plan given our resources and abilities and the limitations of our situation. I don't hear either of us voicing anything better. This isn't a good option, but I don't think we've got another option that has a better shot at success."

"We could hitch hike?"

"I don't want to be reliant on the kindness of strangers and upon strangers not recognizing us from the nightly news. Based on how things are going, I want to involve fate as little as possible. I want to keep control of what's happening in our hands."

"I understand that you don't want to rely on people who could turn you in. I don't want to get shot at by what may or may not be federal agents."

"I don't think we're going to be able to avoid that one for long given our current and growing list of problems"

"Fine, why not? We're probably going to die horribly anyway."

They crouched, motionless, watching the agents mill about, trying to gauge the least suicidal moment to act. The wind slowly waved the grasses into their faces gently scratching and tickling them in the least enjoyable manner Marion could imagine. The sun beat down on them and Marion could feel sweat pooling at the base of his spine. The sound of grasshoppers chirping rose around them as they remained still. Marion began to pass the time by watching their shadows move across the dry gravel strewn earth.

"How are we going to distract them?" Marion asked finally after they had been motionless for nearly fifteen minutes and his legs were beginning to cramp.

"I have absolutely no idea." Harley answered in a frustrated deadpan.

"Well we could-" Harley began to say, only to be cut off by a startled warbling female voice.

"Hey! What are you two doing there?" Marion and Harley turned to see an old woman looking across her white picket fence, metal rake paused mid stroke as she stared at the two of them.

"Crouching suspiciously in the bushes apparently." Marion said.

The agents besides their van turned to look. Harley closed his eyes tightly for a moment and shook his head, "Time to run now."

"I think the world might end if I got lucky." Marion said bitterly.

Verse Two: One Hero's MacGuffin

Marion and Harley sprinted around the corner of the yard away from the old woman yelling and the now aware Men of Black and White that had already surrounded their aging van. Passing into the shadow of the creaking old house, Harley's eye's were caught off guard by the sudden change in light and he collided head on into something roughly ahead shorter than him and both he and the unknown thing went sprawling. Harley shook his head to clear the haze from the impact and heard voices as his eyes adjusted to the shade of the new surroundings.

"Fitz! Are you all right? Mr. Dreamer! Oh my gosh! Fitz we've found them! We're safe!"

Harley's vision cleared and he saw a young girl who looked like she was twelve years old or younger, and boy in his early teens- whom Harley suspected he had just ricocheted off at both groups rounded the corner. A sudden shocked awareness spread over Harley and he looked to Marion in shock. Marion nodded, the look on face was the look of man who had just discovered that somebody had ordered strippers for his twelve year daughter's birthday party.

"These are the kids, aren't they?" Harley said.

"These are Maia and Fitzroy. Marion said, still nodding like a bobble-head toy, "These are definitely them. There is clearly somebody writing this story we're in. And clearly, he's a hack."

Maia and Fitzroy stared at Marion and then at Harley. Fitzroy looked bewildered and Maia wore an unmistakable expression of sheer joy. "I told you Fitz! I told you the Dreamwalker would help us! That's what the stories said, and here they are. And now we don't have to walk the Witch Road alone."

"And they look just as lost and desperate as we do. I don't know that this helps."

Marion looked at Harley, "I don't think the agents were here for us."

Harley looked behind them at the agents approaching rapidly and then over the children's shoulders at the agents approaching rapidly from that direction. Harley grabbed Maia by the hand.

"That's right, here we are. Run for your life." Harley said pleasantly.

And then he took off to their left, with Maia struggling to keep up and Marion and Fitzroy charging along behind them. They spun around the the front of the building and saw more figures in suits and sunglasses.

"Okay, running in a different direction then." Harley said and he grabbed Maia and Fitzroy each by the wrist and dragged them back into the shadow of the house before, hopefully, the agents spotted them. Marion hung in the open for a moment longer than Harley would have liked before noticing and following Harley's lead. Harley quickly climbed over the white picket fence in to the yard of the woman who had called them out and, Marion and the children scrambling after him, Harley nestled himself into the cover of a line of well tended globe cedar shrubs and waited. Footsteps passed them by twice, coming from both directions, and then silence. Harley could hear all four of them breathing, and he prayed nobody else could. Time passed, and Harley was unsure how much, the adrenaline had dilated his perception of time. Harley's brain was convinced it could walk to Bangladesh and back in the space contained within a second. Harley wasn't listening to his brain, because he knew the chemicals pulsing through his brain right now were rendering it entirely unreasonable, and so he just sat in silence and waited, trying to bring himself back to a state where practicality could retain control of his decision making process. And then, once more, a women's voice shattered the quiet.

"What are you doing in my garden? First you hide in the empty lot and now my garden. What are scruffy ruffians doing here? And who are these children. Oh. Oh!"

"Never lucky. Never lucky. Never lucky." Marion said in dejected tones as the women spoke.

"You're those kidnapped children." The woman said in a warbling lilting voice, "And you're the boys wanted in connection with the kidnapping."

"No, no, no," Maia said quickly, "We weren't kidnapped, we ran away. Our dad is a really bad man, he had my mom killed. He had her killed. he had her shoved her in a fridge. Why would somebody do that?"

And they aren't kidnapping us at all. They're saving us. We called them, because he," She pointed at Marion, "Was nice to us when we were visiting his book store, and I didn't know who else to call. Who do you call for help when your Dad has your Mom killed and he can buy the police and stuff?"

The woman turned pale, "Oh dear me, are you serious?"

Fitzroy broke in, "She's very serious, Maia's always serious, she doesn't lie, even when she should. We're in a lot of trouble, we probably can't get out of it. You shouldn't help us, because then you'll be in a lot of trouble too. But it would mean a lot if you helped us anyway, because otherwise we have no hope at all. Please."

"Oh dear me, you poor dears. Of course I'll help you. I am eighty five years old, what can anyone do to me that time hasn't done? Get in my house you poor things. Right now."

Marion shook his head in shock, "Was that the universe giving us good luck?"

"These are kids." Harley said, "Weren't you the one who said we needed to follow the story. This is their story isn't it? Not ours. We get to be Obi-Won Kenobi. I think they're the heroes."

As they spoke, the woman ushered them into the tiny little one storey war house and closed the door. She locked four deadbolts on the door as she shut it and then wiped her hands in satisfaction.

"Now then, I am Mrs. Boots. Retiree, busybody, gardener, reader of tea leaves and scary lady that everyone says is a witch."

Mrs. Boots was surrounded by cats in a way that made Marion think of Mrs. Trilby. Mrs. Boots was an enormous woman however and leaned on two sturdy black canes for support. The effect of the canes and the multitude of cats was to make it look as though the Cats leaning into Mrs. Boots were holding the woman upright.

Mrs. Boots continues, "You too are the children of that business man, whom you have said had your mother killed. Which is awful on the level of raising taxes in Sherwood Forest and Performing Shakespeare to dubstep by the way. But who are you two?"

Harley shook his head, "Two guys that fate decided to throw to the wolves. As Maia said, my friend Marion was present for an altercation between their parents at his job. Then he got fired and those guys in the

suits have been chasing us, and I think they've been chasing the kids too, yes?" Harley looked at Fitzroy for confirmation, and the boy nodded.

Mrs. Boots raised an eyebrow, and a look of recognition crossed her face. "Well then you need help if the official authorities are against you, yes? What can I do?"

"You believe us?" Marion asked in shock, "Not that I don't, or I guess that we don't appreciate it, but unsolicited help hasn't been really common since this started and it kind of feels weird."

"Yes, I believe you. You aren't dreaming. I really will help. What can I do? I'm suspecting that you need to get out of town, and you didn't walk in now did you?"

Harley raised an eyebrow as she talked, listening to her word use.

Maia answered Mrs. Boots, "We hitchhiked," and then Maia added, "Do you know the Witch Doctor?"

Mrs. Boots raised her eyebrows and clicked her tongue and gave Marion and Harley a questioning look. Then after a moment, she shook her head and said, "So, not yet? Well that explains some things. But that's who you children arrived, what about you too young men?"

"We drove but the guys in suits have our van surrounded," Marion said.

"Then you need a distraction. I can help with that."

Harley shook his head, "Alone? There are a lot of them."

Mrs. Boots shook her head, "I never do anything alone. I need a little yin to my yang. I'm going to call my girlfriend and we'll keep those boys in monkey suits busier than a fox in a hen house filled with bear traps."

"That is mental image that make me happier than it should." Marion said.

"All right. I'm going to make a phone call in a minute and then make a lot of noise. That's your signal to run for your little goblin."

"Wait a minute," Harley said, but Mrs. Boots cut him off.

"We don't have a minute, those boys in black and white will start searching houses pretty quick and you don't have time. Just run for your car and let fate take care of the rest. I suspect you four are on a quest, which means you have to trust the path. But fate always sends guides, mentors, so watch for them: your very own Alec Guinness in wizard robes, you have to find his sanctuary, his temple, his monastery. These things are normally in hidden valleys, deep dark forests, barren deserts or on isolated mountain tops. Trust the dream and and walk the path. Now, out my back door, I'll be using my front door for the distraction. Get ready." Mrs. Boots shooed them to the back door as she picked up her phone and began dialling.

As the four made their way tot he back door, Harley heard Mrs. Boots began talking to whoever was on the other line, "Hello old boy, Yes it's me. No time Mercer dear, I'm glad your feeling better, but I need some assistance so get everyone ready."

Marion opened the back door and the four of them crept to the fence and peered over it to the goblin. Two men in suits stood watch.

"That's yours?" Fitzroy asked in concern, "Because it looks old. It looks like it could die on the highway and nobody would notice, because it's so old."

"It is old, but it's tough and easy to repair." Harley answered a little more defensively than he would have liked, "The goblin is what we have right now, and you can trust him. He's noisy but dependable."

"Mrs. Boots called him the goblin, didn't she? How did she know that, and she talked like knew more things like that and other stuff."

"Yes, she did. And I don't know." Harley answered.

"Everyone seems to know more than we do." Marion added.

"What are you doing over there?" Mrs. Boots voice cried from the front yard, full of horror and outrage, "You let her go! She's just a little girl!" Her voice rose with each word.

"Time to run again," Harley said as the two remaining agents ran in the direction of Mrs. Boots' voice.

They charged the Goblin and scrambled in.

"Seat belts." Marion added as Harley slammed the key into the ignition and started the van. Harley put the goblin into reverse and headed back out of town the way they came.

"What's the plan oh mighty sane one?" Marion asked.

"Get back onto the highway, and head in any direction other than what we were heading in previously and figure it out from there."

"Sounds good."

As they drove out of town the streets seemed clear, the search for them seemed to currently be confined to southern half of town, presumably on the assumption that they need the amenities and supplies available there. But as they drove a dark shape caught Marion's eye and he turned to see a shadow thing flit between the shadows cast by the houses. It looked vaguely canine, but Marion couldn't see it clearly.

"Doesn't anyone else see that thing?" Marion asked pointing.

Harley didn't look, focusing on driving, but both kids looked and Maia quickly nodded and looked worriedly at Marion.

"It looks like a dog, but like shadows."

From the shadows at the side of the road came a howl that echoed as though the thing had howled into a pipe organ. Harley pushed the gas pedal down and brought the goblin up to highway speed, racing along abandoned suburb streets. The goblin's engine and tires expressed their outrage as Harley calmly manhandled the vehicle to the highway. Harley brought the goblin on the highway like a torpedo and then shifted wheel and slammed the brakes, spinning the goblin ninety degrees into the southbound lane and accelerated again. The howl sounded again, but more distant.

"Did you see it Harley?" Marion asked.

"No, I was driving, but everything I have dealt with so far has been human looking. What you described sounds like the story raising the stakes again, so the reasonable thing is to take it seriously. Find me a place where we can change direction, east or west, I don't care."

Marion nodded and began scanning the map.

Harley adjusted the rear view mirror to look at the children, "Okay. Marion's met you I think. I just want to confirm something, you two are actually Maia and Fitzroy Salt. Right?"

Fitzroy shook his head, "No. Because a last name would mean family. Because we've lost our family, because family doesn't do the stuff that ours did. Father said we chose exile instead of the family business. But that's because the family business is evil."

"Okay, I'm hearing you two talking like you know more than me and more than Marion. So bring us up to speed on what we're into here. We're listening."

Maia spoke, "I've been having dreams and stuff about bad things and future things. Mom kept having bad things happen to her in the dreams and it was always his fault and those men in the sunglasses and suits were always there and there was a big black snake and I couldn't stop the dreams and I couldn't stop it from happening here either."

"Breathe," Marion said, "We have time. You don't have to rush."

Fitzroy took over, "Maia started have conversations with somebody who called himself the Witch Doctor. I couldn't see him, because this happened in her visions. It was hard to believe, because I couldn't see it. But the Witch Doctor phoned us on my phone and Maia recognized his voice."

"He told us to grab our mom and run and he told he told us to do it right away and we didn't and then Mom got killed and if we'd listened and if we'd listened." Maia broke down into body wracking sobs and Fitzroy wrapped an arm awkwardly around his sister.

"None of this makes sense. We didn't run, because this is all insane. We're probably going to die, because how do you fight this craziness? But we aren't going to die without a fight, because whoever they are, they killed our mother."

"That is some seriously tragic heroic back story right there."

"We're not heroes. We're victims."

Harley shook his head, "Not if it's your story. The one constant that that Marion and I keep hearing from everyone who knows more than we do is that this is a story somehow. Not that it will make a good story, but that this is somehow a story in the big mythic sense. And everyone seems to want this to be their story. If it's your story, you aren't victims. If it's your story, your heroes with a tragic backstory."

"How do we now?"

Marion twisted in the seat to look back at the children, "I don't think anyone can say for sure, but in general the hero is determined by who tells the story. So let's be storytellers shall we?"

"Do you know what's scary?" Marion said, "I prefer this to our normal lives."

"I don't hear you." Harley said, "Why on earth would you prefer this?"

"We hated our normal lives. They give you until about five years old. And then they lock in a class room, send you to the salt mines and stuff you in a retirement home. Nose to the grindstone work until you're no use to the empire anymore. We hated it. You hated it. I hated it. The fact that we accept this as normally is insane."

"It is normal."

"You know it's only normal because everyone agrees it is. If this was all really normal we wouldn't be causing global warming or overpopulation or mass extinction or destroying the coral reefs or all the other horrible things that we do just by carrying on living in this way and calling it normal."

"The correct term is climate change."

"Not the point. If all this was actually normal, people would be happy- they wouldn't pray to lottery tickets and medicate with caffeine and prescription drugs. I'm happier now, on the run with people shooting at me and supernatural dogs and creepy agents chasing me than I ever was when things were normal. Or are you missing your day job?"

"I don't miss my day job."

"So let's embrace the weird."

"We could die you know. That's a little more weird than I want from my life."

"So, death is the only thing we all get to do."

"Everyone can't walk away from the normal or civilization will collapse."

"Didn't I tell you? I had a vision where everything collapsed anyway? For all we know it collapsed because of the normal."

Harley's cell phone rang.

"Marion can you grab that? I'm driving."

Marion reached into Harley's jacket pocket and produced the phone.

"Hi, this isn't Harley." Marion said.

"I know Dreamer, you cannot deceive me." The voice on the other end said.

"Hi. I'm definitely not trying to deceive you, whoever you are. If I was trying to deceive you I'd be telling you that I was Simon Templar or James Bond or something clever like that. Besides, I don't know who you are, so why would I try to deceive you?"

"Because deception might prolong your time in the role of Dreamer. Because if I capture you, your continued survival comes heavily into question."

"Right, so you're ramping up the creepy. I get that. But I've fought giant snakes covered in oil like they've escaped from a Captain Planet episode. I fought cannibal ghosts and mystic secret agents. Why should I be afraid of you?"

"Because I can see the trail of disorder, the scar upon the story that you four leave as you flee. You cannot hide from me. I will simply follow the damage until I find you. I will march behind you, until I can cleanse your infection from my perfect narrative."

"Who are you?"

"Call me the Bone Man. Nothing more is necessary. Do you hear that howl?"

"Yes."

"The hound is hunting for you. The hound is older and stronger than I am. Older and deadlier than my men, than my King. He does not answer to the Grey as Falsenight does. For centuries the Grey has kept him on a leash. I say, he but gender is irrelevant. The hound is not a thing. The hound is a concept, and it is inescapable. It can smell the children, smell their fear. You have one chance to avoid it. And as it turns out, you have the same one chance to avoid dying by my hand. Give the children to us. They are still children in this world, still young and physically immature. You are grown young men and could easily over power them. The vehicle is yours. Turn the vehicle around and drive it back into the hamlet you have just left. Give us the children and all the unpleasant things that have happened to you will stop. You will not be on wanted posters or the evening news. You will have your lives back. Just accept that you are playing a game that you cannot win. Accept that you are out of your depth. Accept defeat with dignity and you can preserve both your dignity and your continued existence."

The kids stared at Marion and Harley. The only sound was the sound of the engine and wheel on the road. Harley reached across and took the phone, turning off the speaker option.

"You didn't give Marion visions. Did you?"

"I can do many many things Walker."

"Yes, you can. But I didn't hear you say that you gave Marion those visions. You didn't. Or you would have said so. You aren't the only player in this game. And we are fighting alone. You're right, we haven't heard the whole story, and we are out of our depth. But you should listen closely, because this is important. You didn't take our lives away. This game took our lives away when didn't listen to it's warnings. So you can't give us our lives back. You want them, come and get them."

"I intend to Walker. Just recall that this was your decision."

"Just keep telling yourself that. There are too many forces shaping this for that to be true."

Verse Three: The Purity of the Bone Man

The Bone Man continued speaking to Harley, "You are not hard to find and not hard to follow. The events of the story are well known. And, of course, you have few places that you can run to at the moment."

"We seem to be managing. And if the story is so well known, how can you stop us? Doesn't the story need to be told?"

"The story needs to be told, but the actors can change. And the story has branches. Our story has the narrative for ten thousand years, the story that you are fighting for does not have a favourable track record."

"I guess that's our job to change then, isn't it?"

"Is that optimism, or false bravado intended to fool me?"

"It's more like an appraisal of the situation. If I heard you correctly, the band I'm playing for hasn't had gigs for a while so I have to change things."

The Bone Man chuckled, a sound like dice rattling in a cup.

"Good Luck. I am coming, and will be here soon."

The line went dead and Harley silently handed the phone to Marion.

"We're in worse trouble than before you know." Harley said as he drove. His voice remained calm and reasonable and he didn't take his eyes off the road as he spoke. Marion did notice that Harley's hands were clenching the steering wheel tightly enough that his knuckles were going white.

"Well, we have a shadow dog thing chasing us, which I can't imagine is ever a good thing. But we've found the kids, somebody actually helped us instead of just prodding us mysteriously or threatening us and we seem to be following what the story wants us to do. So how do you figure worse? I mean besides the shadow dog, because that thing was creepy and I barely saw it."

"Now, for all intents and purposes, we really are kidnapping Darius Salt's children. The real or fake or I don't know government agent looking guys know where we are and there aren't that many places to get off the highway for the next fifty miles or so. So we know are doing the criminal thing we're accused of, which will make us look more guilty for anything else they try to pin on us. And we're exposed and our direction and locations will be easy to predict until we have a chance to change that."

"Why do things always sound worse when you explain them?"

"Because I listen for danger before it eats me. That's why I'm the stable one."

"Do you mean that the guys chasing us will know where we are?" Fitzroy asked.

"They can't help but know," Harley said, "The highway doesn't allow for us to change routes much. Why?"

"Because I see cars blocking the road way down there." Fitzroy pointed.

"You have crazy good eyes kid," Marion said, "I wouldn't have seen that."

The land was flat and the road was visible well into the distance, Marion suspected that the block might still be several miles away, but he wasn't good at judging distance. What Marion saw was a series of white shapes lined across the highway, blocking it.

"I'm listening to him though, that looks like a road block. So we're turning around."

Harley brought the goblin to a halt on the empty highway and performed a neat three point turn and headed back in the opposite direction.

"But they're back there too and stuff aren't they?" Maia asked.

"They are, and we're running back and forth like a bad comedy routines. If we could hear the gods watching us right now, they'd be laughing."

The goblin lumbered back across highway it had already crossed making sounds that seemed to suggest the van was not pleased with the wasted effort. All four of the goblin's passengers scanned the landscape looking for a dirt road turn off they might have missed or at least a spot where the ditches on either side of

the highway were gentle enough to accommodate an off road excursion. But soon enough the slight curve of the highway and the gentle hills of the landscape revealed a line of white vans blocking the road. Harley hit the brakes and immediately began a three point turn. But the slight cover given by the terrain meant that the goblin was far closer to the road block this time and the agents had quite obviously noticed the van and its occupants.

The lead agent pointed a finger at the group and suddenly Marion saw that he was pointing a gun and not a finger. Marion blinked, the agent hadn't drawn a gun, had merely pointed at them and then the finger was the barrel of a gun and the agent was holding it.

The gun fired and marion jumped as the round struck far to close to the goblin for comfort.

"Did you see that?" Marion asked as they ran, "He summoned a gun from nowhere."

"Nobody summoned anything Marion, He drew a gun, that what people do," Harley said, his gaze fixed on his driving, "My mind can accept a lot, but people don't summon weapons out of nothing."

"I did, in the other world, I summoned my tomahawks. I've done it three times now."

"In visions, this is the real world."

Marion shook his head, "I saw the agent do it. I don't know what the real world is anymore."

"Are we going back towards the other bad guys?" Maia asked.

"We are, because we don't have other options, because they've got us trapped." Fitzroy said quietly.

"They are attempted to trap us," Marion, "The trap is a giant net currently floating down upon us like a giant airborne jelly fish of entrapment with deadly tentacle stingers."

"Mr. Dreamer that didn't make sense." Maia said.

"Sorry forget I said anything. The trap isn't locked, remember that."

"I'd like to note that we are now officially being shot at, perhaps we should remember that?" Harley added.

"Also a valid point." Marion said as the goblin picked up speed, clunkering mightily towards the other road block.

Fitzroy looked back through the rear window, "They're getting back into their vehicles. They're going to follow us. We aren't going to be able to get away, because they're following us."

"Any reasonable plans Harley?"

"I'm going to run their blockade. Even if I have to use the goblin as a battering ram."

"Oh my. Is nice Harley about to go in the box?"

"Oh no. Nice Harley is doing fine, but people are shooting at a vehicle containing children and at this point I am out of more sensible ideas. Sadly, running the roadblock is currently leading as the most sensible idea left that we have."

"Fun fun fun." Marion said.

As they approached the roadblock, Marion and Harley quickly assessed it looking for weak points. Once they were close enough to see clearly, Marion's shoulders slumped. The vans were staggered in a double line across the road, broadsides facing the oncoming traffic.

"We can't break through that by force." Harley said flatly.

"The shoulder isn't bad, we could drive around them." Marion said cautiously.

"Not at high speed. We'd have to slow down. And they've graduated to shooting at us."

Harley slowed the vehicle to a stop about a hundred yards back from the road block.

"Step out of the vehicle!" A voice ordered through a bull horn.

"any ideas?" Marion asked.

"Step out of the vehicle or we will open fire." The voice added.

"Step out of the vehicle and get ready to run." Harley said.

Slowly, the ground climbed from the goblin to face the suited figures. The agents surrounded the vehicle. One agent stepped forward, "Escape is impossible, submit."

"Marion, now would be a really good time to have a conveniently useful vision or something." Harley said, his hands clenched into fists.

Marion wracked his brain. This was a story, he was part of it. That much was obvious. But the story was jumbled and he was clearly starting in the middle, and he couldn't untangle the two main story threads, the other world he kept getting pulled into and this world. In this world Marion kept getting the sense that a veil was being briefly lifted so he could see the way the world really was, but that was at odds with the fact that he kept getting pulled into an alternate world that seemed very fairy tale like in construction and obviously not the real world. What was the connection between the two things? He didn't know.

"You know it almost like everything is trying to tell us that this world isn't real." Marion said aloud.

The agent smiled and shook his head, "Incorrect, This world is temporary, irrelevant. What matters is the story. In the Shadowlands the story is immortal."

Marion wracked his brain. If the story world was what was important to them, if the story logic was what mattered then maybe they could be beaten with story logic.

"Harley, I've got a really stupid idea. If it doesn't work, you're going to have to rescue me."

Harley nodded, "If it doesn't work, I won't be around to rescue you. Get crazy."

Marion reached back to the feeling he'd had in the previous three attempts, the feel of his tomahawks in his hands. He felt ridiculous, like a kid playing make believe, the summoning had been a lot easier to justify in his head when he was in a fantasy world. He couldn't feel the tomahawks, it wasn't working.

The agent advanced and put a hand on his shoulder.

"This ends storyteller." The agent said.

Marion looked at the agent, with his unreal supernatural bureaucratic appearance. They all looked identical, the same hair, and nose and chin, as though stamped from a mold or generated by a computer program. This is a fantasy world, Marion realized, this is just as unreal as a mythic pseudo-Europe. No reason that magic wouldn't work in a world that summons armies of identical suit wearing drones.

That did it. The realization that the enemy was using storybook logic was what Marion needed and suddenly he could feel his tomahawks in his hands. Marion rammed Edgar- the tomahawk in his left hand- into the gut of the agent, causing the drone to double over. The other hand brought Victor's cutting edge chopping down through the exposed neck of the agent. As the blade cut through the agent's neck the body disintegrated into smoke and Marion spun through the misty remains of the agent to face the others.

The agents froze and took a step back in unison.

And Marion charged. The agents didn't stand a chance. They summoned up pistols, and this time Harley actually saw the guns form like congealing smoke into their hands. But they were much too slow. Marion flowed through them a hurricane composed of cutting edges, The agents billowed and exploded into smoke one by one leaving Marion standing breathing heavy at the centre of a slowly dispersing ring of smoke.

Harley stood, staring that the tomahawks in Marion's hands.

Harley took everything in for a brief moment and then, mentally collected, he nodded.

"Okay, now we run again. Everyone into the goblin."

They piled into the goblin and Harley inched the goblin around the roadblock on the shoulder. Behind them the vans from the previous road block were approaching.

"They won't be able to get around as easily. That will buy us some time. I'm going to run the goblin into the ground to get some distance on them before they can chase again." Harley said.

As they picked up speed, Harley's cell phone rang.

"That'll be the Bone Man to give us our next threat, I imagine. i have to drive. marion can you listen to him rant?"

"With pleasure," Marion said and grabbed the phone, "This is Dreamer. How may I help you."

"You will regret that decision, I think."

"I doubt it. I can beat your goons now. I know how to play this game."

"Indeed, you are awakening to your role. Allow me to submerge you in it."

"What are you talking about."

"You have awakened, but not fully, you are unclean. I will purify you and let you truly awaken to your role, that should remove you from play effectively. Consider it my gift. I would also like to point out that only your most admirable progress in awakening has made this possible."

"What?" Marion began to say and suddenly an audible wave of pressure burst from the receiver of the phone and knocked Marion against the window of the car causing him to drop the phone, the wave clipped Fitzroy in the back seat as well, driving him back into the corner of the seat, his head knocking hard against the seatbelt ring.

"Marion, can you hear me?" Harley said loudly, "Marion are you there? Can you hear my voice, Marion?"

Marion didn't respond, and the silence stretched.

Harley reluctantly took his eyes of the road and glanced at Marion. his friend lay slumped forward in the seat, eyes open but staring blankly into nowhere. Harley noted that Marion had a nosebleed. The cellphone lay in Marion's lap, the call disconnected.

"Marion! Marion wake up! Can you hear me?"

"He's not here anymore. He's in the Shadowlands," Fitzroy said, his voice wavering as he spoke.

"What do you mean? How do you know where he is?" Harley asked.

"I can see him there. He's not here anymore, they pushed him out."

"Out of where?"

"I don't know, but I can see here at the same time as I can see there," Fitzroy said, speaking in a halting wavering voice, "It hurts. I can't focus on either."

Chapter Three

Verse Four: Walking the Witch Road

Marion was out, not unconscious, but certainly not lucid. He stared into the distance and didn't react to anything Maia or Harley said or did. Maia poked his cheek, pulled his ears and, even blew on his eyeballs during a bathroom stop at a rest station. Marion mumbled occasionally, but responded to nothing either Maia or Harley attempted. Fitzroy was semi-lucid, but focusing was clearly difficult for him and he spent most of the journey with his head down and his hands over his ears trying to block out what he could. Harley drove in silence and Maia fidgeted in her seat uncomfortably until she finally couldn't hold her questions in anymore.

"Mr. Walker."

"Call me Harley, Maia."

"But aren't you the Walker?"

"I don't know. "

"But how can you not know? You're supposed to save us from this stuff."

"I still don't understand any of this. Marion's getting dragged off to fractured version of Narnia, but stuff is still happening in this world like we're in the Matrix and it's glitching."

"I've seen the Narnia movies. But what's the Matrix?"

"Never mind, I don't want to give fate ideas at this point. Fitzroy? How are you doing?"

Fitzroy didn't look up, "It hurts. I can't think, because it hurts."

"Okay, just hang in there then. I won't bother you unless you need me. You hear me?" Fitzroy nodded and Harley kept speaking, "Maia, I need you to listen and then you need to help me understand. We are currently running for our lives for magic secret agents much less amusing than the ones on television, they have murdered your mother, seem to be working for your father and have framed us for both the murder and your kidnapping. In retrospect, I suppose we are kidnapping you- at least legally. In any case, The big bad agent man has zapped Marion and your brother. Marion is off further in la la land than normal, he can't hear us even if he is conscious. And your brother is halfway loopy. In other words, it's just us left navigating this insanity, and I barely know anything. Marion had the visions. Marion met your parents. Marion saw the agents way before I did. So, since you seem to know more than I do, but I'm stuck being the adult here, I need you to bring me up to speed as best you can so that I can keep us alive and free. Agreed."

Maia looked at Fitzroy and Marion and then nodded, "Okay. He said he had to tell me a story and he said it was a true story and that I would understand it when I heard it and I would feel it in my bones and stuff and I really did and. I. I."

"let's keep the sentences down to a reasonable length so you can breath. Don't worry, I'm listening, and I am not going anywhere. I'm right here."

"Okay. We talked to the Witchdoctor."

"And who is the Witchdoctor? I keep hearing you mention him."

"He's in the story and he said he's just like you only at a different point in the story, and he told me the story and he said that the story is what everything is about."

"I'm getting lost Maia. I'm honestly not sure what I'm hearing. But I've heard Marion talk about the idea that we're part of some story in a kind of big mythology sense, so if this Witchdoctor fellow told you 'the story', you should probably start there."

"Okay. He said stories were magic, and they were spells. And every story started with an incantation or something else. Like 'Once upon a time' and stuff like that. he said his stories were older and newer than 'once upon a time' stories and that his stories started with 'Long ago in the future', and they did that because stories were timeless, and they were wheels or circles and stuff like that."

"You're losing me again Maia. Just tell me the story, and I'll listen."

"Okay. Long ago in the future, time was a wheel that turned. No end and no beginning. Then the rebel child broken the wheel and flattened it into a line."

"He flattened the wheel into a line? What does that mean?"

"The witchdoctor didn't say."

"I'm sorry, keep going, I'm listening."

"And he said the line must last forever, just like the wheel had been forever. But wheels are forever because they connect to themselves and roll. Lines must end. And so the rebel child became the False King and maintained the line by stealing from others to lengthen the line."

"Okay, that sounds a lot like what Marion was talking about, keep going, this is sounding similar."

"But the more he stole, the less remained and it seemed the line would end anyway. And now everyone was part of his line, because he had stolen and beaten and taken from everyone and made them part of his line. And so if the line ended, everything ended. And then storyteller told the Princess of the False King a secret, that the wheel could still last forever, and she needed to make the line back into a wheel if everyone was going to be okay. And so the Princess told the Prince and they ran away with the Storyteller and travelled the Witch Road to the Shadowlands and they found the story of the wheel and they rebuilt the wheel and the story rolled forever."

"So, If I'm hearing you and Marion correctly, then you're the Princess and Fitzroy is the Prince and your Dad is the Fake King."

"The False King."

"Right, and we're the Storytellers. What I don't understand is that Marion was told that your mom was the Storyteller, and you said that the Witchdoctor is the Storyteller. How can they all be the storyteller and Marion and me all still somehow be the storyteller?"

"I don't know. The Witchdoctor didn't say. But when I saw the other places like the Dreamer," She nodded towards Marion, "I saw my dad like a monster onion, all layers and he was only one part of the onion and it was like he was one layer. So maybe it's like that stuff kind of maybe?"

"Well that still leaves a lot I didn't hear answers for, like who the Bone Man is or who the Witchdoctor is or what it means when people call Marion and Me the Dreamer and the Walker, but it's something. So if I heard correctly, the False King- your Dad- broken the story somehow to make it do what he wants, but the story doesn't work that way and so everything will fall apart if somebody- you apparently- doesn't fix it. Did I hear you correctly?"

"I think so. Do you know what we need to do? You're the Walker, you're the storyteller."

"I don't know. I hadn't heard any of this a week ago. This is all news to me. A week ago, my life was normal except for my crazy best friend, but we've known each other for so long that was part of my normal. This is not part of my normal. Life is kind of like jazz music. There are variations, everyone is kind of making it as they go along, but there are rules. This is all new. Part of me wants to say that this has no rules, but it does, and I can hear the patterns when they show up a second time. I can hear the style and quirks and preferences. This is still jazz, but it's a whole different set of rules. And unlike Jazz, not knowing the rules could do more than ensure a bad performance. If we don't figure out how to play this new music, it's going to kill us, or worse."

"But the Witchdoctor said you would know."

"He did, huh? I guessed he forgot to tell us that."

"Then what do we do?"

"Right now, we run. And we pay attention, listen for every clue that people drop who know more than us. I don't like this, but we have to trust the crazy, because that's what all of this is going to sound like until we learn how this jazz needs to be played."

"So you do know what to do."

"No, I know how to cope. I know how to survive. That's what I do. Other people play. I endure."

"You mean, people don't beat you?"

"I don't let them beat me. The world try to beat you, every day. I don't let it. Neither should you."

"You are the Storyteller, aren't you?"

"I imagine I have to be, don't I?"

Harley went back to driving silently, and before too long he could tell Maia had fallen asleep. Harley could here her breathing turn even and a quick look into the rear view mirror confirmed what he had heard. Harley smiled and continued to drive with his goblin load of passengers. Maia, for her part, found herself standing in a deep expansive blackness. The air felt impossibly cold and yet she didn't mind the cold. Spreading out from her position was a vast spreading spider web, and Maia could see vibration running along the strands of the web. And in the darkness, a voice spoke to her.

"Little mother has arrived. I greet you little mother. You are not all here yet. And so I suspect that this is just an introduction and not your initiation into this new cycle. It have been a long time since I have been free to weave my web in the circles we once drew. It has been a long time since the great Serpent arced across the sky to celebrate the rain and danced with your hero. It has been too long since the Storytellers coaxed the embers to life and told the story so that the Phoenix might resurrect itself from the telling. We have waited for you, little mother. We have missed you."

"Who are you? This stuff is scary and big and I don't understand any of it." Maia said to the voice in the darkness.

"I am the weaver, the keeper of tales. As the Storytellers tells the tales through their connection with the firebird, so too does the First Mother use the stories to connect the people to the earth through her understanding of my webs. This is what was written in The Infinity Network and the Midnight Archives, this is what will be written. Long Ago in the Future Mystery was. The Song began with the Birth Cries of this universe and the heat and expansion that are the hallmarks of birth. This was the Primal Time. The Song began to sing of lights in the darkness and the Void was lit by the first fires of the first stars. And so Fire and Void became companions. This was the Star Time. Next the Stars began to age and die and the Song began to sing of twilight and end times. This was the Elder Time. And then the Stars went out and the greatest of the voids, black holes in the night were all that remained. And the song began to sing of exits to other places and hope for escape. This was the Void Time. And then all went quiet and the Song rested and the song sang the only thing left to sing, silence. This was the Quiet Time."

"Okay, this is crazy and stuff and I'm not a mother. I'm just a kid who's got no mom, and I don't understand this."

"You are not a child. You are older than the road you travel upon, and older than the city you have fled. And although you have lost a mother today, you are a mother to all."

"I don't understand any of that stuff. How can you be telling the truth?"

"None of this is fact. All of this is true. This is story and story is the archive of all knowledge, the network upon which we interact with the world, the book from which we read our part. But I will make an offer of my good faith. I am the weaver of stories and of webs, and there is a web stretched across the path you travel, waiting to snare you. It is not one of my webs, and you would do well to avoid this trap. Now wake."

Maia snapped awake and startled Harley as she blurted out her warning, "It's a trap! I had a dream about a giant space spider, and he said there's a trap on the road or something."

Harley nearly drove the Goblin off the road as they came over a gentle crest and as the van stood on the high ground the landscape of rolling grassy hills spread out in all directions in ochre and brown and gold. He peered out at the road meandering into the distance. A flash of white light, like the flash of a camera caught Harley's attention and his expression changed as he strained to look down the highway.

"That looks like a road block. I course it does. I can practically hear the sirens. Now what? Take a random dirt road and hope for the best doesn't sound like a good option. I don't want to head deep into some rural backwater."

"Yes," Fitzroy's voice rose weakly from the back seat, "There's a little turn off on the right coming up right now. The cattle guard and the open gate, take it. Now!"

Harley saw the cattle guard just in time to hit the brakes and swerve across the rattling grate into a farmer's field of some sort on a dirt road that was probably used to deliver food to various pastures.

"Okay Fitzroy, I've just charged off road. How did you know that was there? And do you know where we should go next?"

"Yes, and Yes. Because I can see the Witch Road. It hurts, because both worlds are overlapping. But because they're overlapping, I can see the Witch Road. I can get us to the Witchdoctor."

Verse Five: Exit, Pursued by Hound

"Sorry, I know I've heard that term before, but what was the Witch Road?" Harley asked, listening to Fitzroy. The goblin rattled along old pasture trails that had more in common with well worn ruts in the grass than they did with actual roads.

"The Witchdoctor said it was like a secret path that wizards and witches used to find the story and be where they needed to be and stuff like that." Maia answered.

"He said it wasn't a physical road, because it didn't exist in this world. It existed in all worlds, because it spread out like spider webs from the Shadow lands." Fitzroy added.

"And what are the Shadow Lands? Have I heard that before? Or is that new mythology, I have to add to the growing list of things I need to know and fear?"

"I don't know. The Witch Doctor said that the Shadow lands were where all gods and demons and magic lived, where it all came from, because he said that the Shadow Lands and the story were the same thing. I didn't understand everything he said though."

"I hear you. I don't understand most of this." Harley agreed, "But whatever it is, you can see it. Right? So I'm listening to you. Where do I go?"

"Follow this trail for a while. I think we're safe right now. The Witchdoctor said that the men of black and white couldn't see the witch road. Maybe they can't see us when we're on it."

"Did you see that Fitz?" Maia asked.

"See what? I was talking to Harley?" Fitzroy answered.

"I thought I saw that shadow dog thing again." Maia answered.

"Do you see him now?" Harley asked.

"No." Maia said.

"Then let's hope it was just a mirage. It almost certainly wasn't, but let's hope a little longer until the next crisis hits."

"Don't fear the black," Marion whispered from the passenger seat, "Even the blackest heart is made of black earth, made from the mother. Fear is the test, don't go grey in the face of black."

"Marion, can you hear me?" Harley said as soon as there was a pause in Marion's ramblings.

"Don't be taken hostage by fear, don't be used by fear. Fear cannot win. No good comes from submitting to fear. When the black heart is tempted by fear, when the blackness comes for you, stand strong and act without fear."

"I don't think he can hear any of the stuff happening to us, Mr. Walker." Maia said.

"Even the Lion can be corrupted if it falls victim to fear. Fear springs from separation. Trust the tribe, trust your allies. We do not fight alone."

"Is he talking to us do you think?" Fitzroy asked.

"I can't tell just from hearing what he's saying. It's classic prophecy, vague and full of portent. He could just be having another of the alternate world visions, and maybe this is what he does in magic land. I haven't seen him have a proper vision before. He could be trying to warn us, but with prophecy, you almost always recognize what it's talking about too late."

Fitz grabbed his head and groaned in pain, closing his eyes.

"Fitz, are you okay?" Maia asked.

"The Witch Road is shifting. Let me focus, because this isn't easy. I think I could fall out of this world like Marion if I don't focus."

"Quiet then Maia, give him silence so he can focus." Harley said.

"To the right, towards that stand of trees, the dead ones, There is a dry river bed that locals use as an off road trail. Can the Goblin handle a river bed?"

"Cricket built tough vehicles, that's why they went out of business, a cricket van will never stop working if you have even the slightest bit of automotive know how. They don't know how to die."

Harley slowed the goblin and the vehicle descended into the dry river bed. River rocks grinding loudly together echoes like gnashing teeth through the goblin's steel frame body. Harley found his best position and began to slowly guide the goblin along the river bed, and found himself noting that the sparse trees provided pretty good cover for them as they made their way down Fitzroy's invisible witch road.

They drove all day without incident, travelling along a series of winding back roads without apparent rhyme or reason. They saw no more white vans and no men in suits and sunglasses. Eventually Fitzroy led them back onto paved roads, but these were still badly maintained rural roads and not the highway. When evening arrived, they set up camp at a nearly empty public camp ground. Harley was bent over the fire pit. he had just succeeded in lighting a fire when they heard the howl, long and echoing as though funnelled through a pipe organ.

"I heard the." Harley said, looking up. "That can't be good."

Harley scanned around. Marion was sitting where they had left him, slumped on the picnic table. They had at least been able to lead him around, and hadn't needed to carry him. Maia and Fitzroy were crouched behind Harley, watching him expectantly.

"We need to get Marion to the Goblin and go." Harley said. The children nodded and Harley was just starting to stand, when the fire suddenly sputtered and then died.

It emerged from the shadows, like a dog, but not, dark or black or worse. Harley kept the children behind him as the thing approached.

"Well, I guess this is the hound." He whispered.

The Hound circled them, orbiting like a predatory black hole. The Hound was darkness but not dark. Beyond blackness, the Hound was the absence of light, hard to look at and hard to see. The Hound was void, shaped vaguely like a wolf or a dog. The air around the hound grew cold. Noise silenced around the hound. All motion or sound disappeared in proximity to the hound. Frost formed on vegetation as it

passed, not walking precisely, occupying the void that it had created ahead of itself by silencing all motion. A singularity of nothing. A point of void moving across the page like a hungry rip tearing open reality. It was clear that the hound did not devour prey. The hound deleted prey.

"When I say, run for the goblin. I'll get Marion. Fitzroy, you take the front seat, we'll stuff Marion in the back."

"I'm afraid." Maia said.

"It's okay to be afraid, just make sure you aren't frozen by it. Go!"

Harley bolted towards Marion and grabbed his friend by both wrists. Wrestling the semi-cooperative Marion from the picnic table was difficult, but Harley noted that the children were running to the goblin and the Hound seemed indecisive as to whom to chase. Harley wrestled Marion to a standing position and then dragged him towards the car as the Hound slowly turned towards the two of them. Harley yanked open the back of the van and pushed Marion bodily into the rear of the vehicle. Slamming the door shut Harley glanced back and saw the hound silently trotting towards them. Harley scrambled around to the driver's side and heaved the door open before climbing into the driver's seat.

"Seat belts This is going to be unpleasant." Harley said as he turned the key in the ignition and the goblin gasped to life. Harley watched the hound slowly approach, the thing was barely moving at an amble now. Harley shifted the goblin into gear and began to press the gas pedal. The goblin started to move forward and harley began to maneuver the van out of the parking space.

The Hound reached the goblin and a web of frost spread out across the body work of the old van. The goblin's engine sputtered and then went abruptly silent and Harley found the van without power, slowly coasting to a stop.

"That doesn't sound good." Harley Muttered to himself.

He turned the ignition again, no sound emerged. The engine did not even try to turn over. The goblin was silent. Harley heard Maia gasp and turned to look back. The frost had penetrated the body and was spreading across the interior of the vehicle as well. Harley looked out the window to see the hound sitting on its haunches, waiting. The thing even seemed to yawn, perhaps in boredom and gave Harley a brief, faceless glance through the side view mirror.

"That thing is playing with us." Harley said, "Fitzroy, which way to the witch road? i think we may have to run."

Fitzroy didn't answer and Harley looked back at the children through the rear view mirror. Fitzroy was curled into a fetal position on the seat, his seatbelt not in place.

"Fitzroy, can you hear me? Are you still with us?" Harley asked as Maia cradled her brother and looked up helplessly at Harley.

Fitz held his head with both hands and shook, "I can't see a way past it. it's too powerful It can just swallow the whole witch road! It hurts. Make it stop! It's so cold!"

The frost reached the front window and began its spiderweb climb across the wind shield. Harley shook his head and then unbuckled his seatbelt.

"Mr. Walker, what are you doing?" Maia asked.

"Something stupid. Something Marion would do." Harley said as he climbed out of the vehicle. He closed the driver side door and stepped forward. As he passed the back window he looked in at Marion, "If you can hear me Marion, I need you help. We need a miracle, and I don't know how to call up the axes of yours, so I'm probably going to die. I don't want to die, and I could really use your help."

Marion shuddered in the back. He was covered in frost from head to sneakers, and Harley couldn't tell if his friend were reacting to him or the frost. Harley faced the hound, who stood and began to circle Harley. Frost formed as circle around him as the hound walked and the frost began creeping inward towards Harley as he stood at the centre of the circle.

"You're big scary ghost dog, I get it. But so what. I don't care that you're scary."

The hound stopped and cocked its head. Then it tilted it's head back and howled it's pip organ howl. The frost reach Harley's shoes.

"Stop trying to scare me and just try to kill me. Because apparently, I'm part of the story. I don't know how to do any of the story things that Marion can do. So I'm just going to hope that you bleed. Faint hope, I know. But I don't see any options."

"We do not fight alone!" Harley turned in shock to see Marion roll from the back of the goblin. he landed in a heap in the packed earth of the camp ground, spraying frost everywhere. "Trust your allies! Call for aid! I call for aid!"

The air whirled between the hound and Marion. Harley watched as a translucent red cat appeared on the road, back arched teeth barred for combat.

"Mercer?" Harley said in astonishment.

The ghostly form of Mercer faced the hound and began to grow quickly reaching the size of a cougar. The Hound's posture changed, and it actually seemed interested. Marion was still yelling about how they had allies. Harley noticed, then, that the frost had melted, from his feet, from Marion and from the goblin.

"Marion if you can hear me, get in the van!" Harley bolted for the driver's seat, "Maia, get Marion in the back!"

Harley hauled himself into the driver's seat. behind them Mercer launched himself at the Hound with a hiss and shriek. Harley didn't look back.

"Is Marion in?"

"Yes sir!"

Harley turned the ignition and the goblin returned to life. Harley hit the gas pedal and the goblin peeled out of the camp ground.

Verse Six: Into Myth, Into Shadow

Marion looked around. He knew the landscape, wild and untouched, the ancient landscape spread out out him in all directions. The moss and grasses were intact under his feet, and he noted that he was now standing up rather than sitting in the front passenger seat of the Goblin. The shape of the landscape was unmistakable. Although the last time he had been here the ground had been a slick stain of grey of clay and mud and the landscape had been denuded of trees and foliage, the shape was still the same. Marion

knew he was in world where he had first met Morrigan. Above him stretched a washed out grey white mass of clouds, beneath his feet was a mix of warm tan and rich green grasses and mosses stretching out for miles and miles. The hills rolled around Marion and in the distance Marion could see mountains and huge expanses of forest that seems unreal, with trees that seemed full sized even as Marion viewed them from miles away. Marion shook his head, and tried to take of stock of his situation. Voices down the hill caught his attention and he turned to see a group of knights, the sort he had fought in the village back before he had fled the city.

"Well, at least he sent me somewhere that I know. But of course, now I can't help Harley and the kids. I wonder if I'm even still in the car? I could have just disappeared. You know I didn't think of that before. I don't know if I even stay in the real world when I get sent here. Now why would Mr. Bad Guy in the White Suit dump me here? He could have been trying to take me away from the group to separate us or to somehow put us at a disadvantage. He might be able to attack me from here easier. He might secretly be trying to help us and the secret to everything is hidden here. No that's probably not likely, that would have mean I was lucky. So it's probably, almost certainly something bad. But the big question is whether he was trying to do bad things to me or to everyone else when he did this. I don't know. I just don't know. But on the good side, I'm not in the city so I'm not immediately surrounded by guys with weapons ready to kill me."

A man's voice spoke behind Marion and he jumped.

"You are correct that you are not in a city. The other part? Let us say that it may have been wiser not to speak out loud as you did. Such actions tend to attract predators."

Marion turned to see a group of a dozen or so men and women dressed in leather clothes and armour, painted in black and red body paint with heart symbols painted in black on the leather breast plates of their armour or directly onto their chests if they didn't wear a breast plate. They all carried tomahawks or large knives and had bows over their backs. Marion thought that they looked odd, a little like somebody had mashed together a tribe of Germanic Celts and a Tribe of the Pawnee or the Lakota Sioux, with maybe a little Mongolian tribal warrior as well. At the head of the group was a man wearing his Black face Make Paint in a skull design with sharp red stripes painted across the shoulder guards of his leather armour He wore his hair in a huge black lion's mane that spread out wildly from his face with a headdress made from the antlers or a white-tailed deer and had the bearing of a leader. Marion met his appraising gaze.

"So, I'm guessing you're in charge? I'm really hoping that we don't have to fight. Pretty much everyone I've met for the last couple days has been something that I've had to fight, and I'm getting tired of it."

"You are unarmed," The man with the mane observed, "I understand why you wish not to fight. You would die."

Marion grinned at that, "I'm never unarmed. I just haven't drawn my weapons, yet." And with that Marion focused and, easily this time, summoned his tomahawks. The warriors shifted uneasily and several took a half step or more back in surprise. They began muttering amongst themselves, and Marion thought he heard words like sorcerer or shaman or demon.

The man with the mane didn't budge or flinch, instead he seemed to size Marion up and after a moment's silence, he nodded, "I had heard that the ones from the Legends were returning. This is a good time for legends to return. My people are under siege by the Locust King and his forces. They do not stop unless they are made to lose, and then they try to make a false peace that they can betray later. Always they advance. Either with soldiers or with farmers. And when my people wake there is less free space than the day before, more land enslaved and fewer places to continue fighting from, fewer places to hunt, fewer places to place a village in the winter. The Wendigo rise around us in the blighted landscape after the Locust has passed. Fearful and hungry, they prey on everyone they can reach. The signs point to apocalypse. It is a good time for legends to return. Twin Tomahawks, that means you are the Dreamer, yes?"

Marion nodded cautiously, "So they tell me. But I'll be honest, this is all very new to me. A few days ago, I had never heard this term. I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that you're Blackhart? And that the people with you are the ones the city folk call the savages and the rebels."

His comments caused an unfriendly ripple of muttering through the warriors, and the man with the mane answered, "I am Blackhart. But, don't fear the black. Even the blackest heart is made of black earth, made from the mother."

"I'm not afraid of you," Marion, "Not because you don't look dangerous, because you guys really do, it's quite impressive really. But, I've seen scarier since all of this started, and it's getting hard to scare me."

"That's good. Fear is the test. The Wendigo become so, because they fall to fear, fall to the Grey. Don't go grey in the face of black. And to your other question, the city folk do call my people savages. Do you?"

"Only if you call yourselves that."

Blackhart shook his head, "We used to call ourselves many things. My tribe is a broken thing, stitched together from many other tribes that once were and were no longer. Other tribes made agreements, signed peace treaties and established borders with the Locust King and his empire. These never lasted, they were only ever tricks to buy time for the soldiers to regroup or for the farmers to arrive and tear up the land and destroy everything we had tended for generations. Tribe after tribe was either destroyed by their soldiers in battle, with their armour and the never ending reinforcements, or pushed out by settlers. I have gathered up the remnants of many peoples and we have said no more. We call ourselves the Broken Tribe, and we fight an impossible fight against a never ending foe. But if one of the storytellers is here, the perhaps things are about to change. The legends say that the storytellers will find First Mother, and that she will find First Hero. And that when her brother breaks the Locust King's line of succession First Mother and First Hero will rebuild the old ways and reunite the broken the circle. Your presence gives me hope. You must come with us."

Marion looked around at the warriors in front of him.

"I don't like that word 'must'. Are you sure you don't mean something more like a request and less like a command?"

"You are one of the great heroes of legend. You have great mystical power, events turn around you and your partner like you are the axis and the world is a great wheel. I am not letting you fall into the hands of the Locust King. Your presence here is too powerful to give up."

"In other words, I'm a prisoner?"

"You are conscripted to my cause."

"Those are some really grey distinctions there. If the prophecy says that I'm supposed to find and teach the First Mother, how do you expect me to do that while you've got me conscripted to your little insurgency?"

"The wheel will turn around you. The prophecy will find you. And in the mean time, you power will hold off the Locust King and his forces. You have always opposed the Locust King. Why would you object to doing so now?"

"I don't object to doing so. I'm fighting him right now in another world, I think that's what it is, I guess I'll find out later. Where was I? Oh yes, I object to being trapped by somebody who I thought was maybe one of the good guys."

"I am one of the last obstacles in the path to the whole world falling before the Locust King. Three Chiefs Remain. Myself and Storm Crow and Clovenfoot. Storm Crow is clever and she still has her tribe intact. I think Clovenfoot has been protected by geographic distance and the landscape working in his favour, he is a noble man, but neither bold nor clever. If Storm Crow and I fall, then Clovenfoot will fall like leaves in Autumn."

"And then?"

"And then the whole world will be the play ground for the Locust King. His minions will devour the world and then the world will end. The Locust King offers us a chance to join him. He offers everyone a choice. Feast with him and starve tomorrow or fight against him and die today. I would die a warrior. But that is not my first plan."

"What is your first plan then? You've told me that the Locust King is rampaging across your world conquering everything in it's path. In my world, he's already won and has been in power of so long nobody knows anything different. Well at least I think so from what I've heard in my visions. I could be wrong, prophecy is a really unreliable way of explaining things. But either way, his empire lasts forever, or at least longer than either of us will be alive."

"That is the lie that Locust King tells his people as they expand across the land like his namesake. It will be your children's children's problem. The feast will end eventually, but not in your lifetime. The end is a long way off. But I remember what things looked like when the Locust King was just a young boy, hoping to be a warrior for his tribe. I remember streams filled with salmon and trout. I remember forests with trees that five warriors could not reach around if they joined hands. I remember flocks of Heath Pigeons that would blacken the skies for days. I remember the great herds of the the great beast folk of old. I remember the quiet of the forest and the field, now replaced by the sound of marching metal on cobblestone roads. One day soon, the Locust King's farm will be parched cracking soil. One day soon the land will die from the war the Locust King and his people wage against it. And then the wendigo will rise up hungry from his dying cities and charge across the land in a desperate attempt to sate their hunger, and the great castles and holds and cities and towns that the Locust King had his empire carve into the earth will stand empty and broken."

"I think I've seen this." Marion said, thinking back to the vision of the other girl in the broken city.

"You may have seen it. I am not a prophet and not a sorcerer nor a shaman. I have only seen it because I can remember how things were, and when I look at how things are now, I can see the future like a forest fire bearing down upon my camp."

"You're desperate."

"I am. They have offered me treaty after treaty promising everlasting peace. They offered peace as long as the rivers ran and the mountains stood. But I have seen two things that shake my bones and make me refuse. I lead my people, but they are not an old tribe. They are the scattered remnants of tribes that accepted the peace treaties of the Locust King. And look at them now, refugees in lands under siege, looking back at the conquered remains for the lands they once called home. And, I have seen the servants and slaves of the Locust King as they dam the rivers and mine the mountains. The rivers will run dry and the mountains will be dug up, and where then will the terms of their treaties be, even if they had by some miracle honoured the treaty against all odds? No, they seek to devour the world. They are possessed by an all consuming hunger madness, they must feast and grow and grow and feast, and they do not care if they devour the whole of the world to do so. There can be no peace with such people, they will say anything and lie without breaking stride if it helps soften their hunger pangs."

"And so you'll do whatever you have to in order to oppose them."

"No, but I will do a great deal more than I would have liked under different circumstances."

"And that includes messing with this prophecy you're relying on to save you? If I'm supposed to find the First Mother, why not help me do that instead of trying to use my supposed power as a pawn in your game."

"What is a pawn?"

"It's piece, in chess. A game, with a board with black and white squares where the people play a game like a battle with pieces on the board. I, you know I don't think it matters. You're treating me like a piece in a game and trying to use me to your advantage. Why bother doing that if the prophecy says I'm going to find First Mother and fix things?"

"The prophecy says many things, and it rarely says when. I have many lives to protect. I am not waiting on a fickle prophecy to decide enough of my people have died."

"And what if you screw up the prophecy? What if you get me killed?"

"The prophecy will find another."

"But how long will that take?"

Blackhart looked hard into Marion's eyes, "Neither you or I know for certain that it will happen at all. Prophecies are words and nothing more if somebody doesn't come later and make them true. I will make my own way and people will look back at the prophecies and find a way to match the two."

Marion shook his head, "My life was destroyed, torn apart piece by piece by the prophecy. It demanded that I follow it. I am done watching my life and the life of my only friend fall apart. The prophecy says I have to find First Mother, whoever that is, fine, I am finding her. You want to stop me and use me because I'm powerful? Remember that I am powerful. Are ready to go through my tomahawks to make me do what you want?"

Now Blackhart shook his head, "You are a warrior. I see that. You are not a murderer. You will not kill me. You disagree with my methods, you think I am misguided or wrong headed perhaps. You don't think I'm evil. You will not use your weapons on me."

"Are you willing to bet your life on that?"

"I bet my life every day. I am right. You will not strike me. You know how many lives depend upon me. You will not strike me down."

The tomahawks evaporated into nothing, and Marion flung his arms up in frustration, "You are a colossal turdblossom!"

"But I was and am right."

"Turdblossom!"

Verse Seven: A Dagger through Parchment

Marion stared at Blackhart, the rebel chieftain, in frustration. The guy had him nailed. Until he could confirm Blackhart as good guy or condemn him as bad guy, Marion was unwilling to fight him.

"How can you be a good guy if you're playing my good intentions against me?" Marion asked in Frustration.

"You were raised in one of the Locust King's cities then? The Locust King's stories are filled with good guys and bad guys. In his stories the hero is always right and the villain is always despicable, and usually opposes the people already in power. In real stories the hero is simply the one who does what is needed to keep the story turning. Heroes can be awful people, so long as they turn the story. And there was no villain in the old story before the Locust King, and I'm not even sure he is the villain. For all we know, he is the hero delivering a medicine we do not wish to receive. But that thought scares me. I cannot imagine how his actions would be necessary to the story, and so I oppose them. No, city boy shaman, I am not a good guy and I am not a bad guy. There are no good guys and no bad guys in the old stories, and I am most definitely a being of the old stories."

"Do you always monologue?"

Blackhart was not looking at him, Marion suddenly noticed. The man had shifted posture gradually, scanning the surrounding landscape as they spoke. The chieftain reached over his shoulders and pulled to simple obsidian daggers that had been concealed somewhere on his back.

"Only when I don't want the enemy to know that I see them." He said casually. The other warriors spun and looked wildly, immediately drawing tomahawks and daggers as they did. "I think you will now find uses for your tomahawks city shaman."

"I don't see a thing." Marion said, looking around at the quiet landscape.

"The things see you. Be glad you were not alone." Then Blackhart addressed the empty landscape, "I smell your oil and steel Mordred. You reek of your father's magic. You may as well loose an arrow or call the charge."

A voice echoed amidst the grasses, "Are you in a hurry to die? Father will finally acknowledge me properly after I present him with your head."

"My head would be an empty symbol little boy, as hollow as your father's respect. I am a many headed serpent, cut off my head and a thousand black hearts will rise in anger against you."

"You don't have a thousand hearts left Savage," And from a hidden depression in the grass a young teenaged boy emerged in silver plate armour emblazoned with a symbol of a cherub radiating ray of light. The boy looked nearly identical to Fitzroy, save that his hair was a curly platinum blonde. Around Marion, Blackhart and his warriors a host of knights rose out of the grasses. "Who is the wizard at your side Savage? I don't recognize his sigils?"

Marion looked down at his shirt and noticed he was wearing Harley's old shirt to annoy the devote, emblazoned with the helvetica styled letters: "WWLD?" What would Loki Do? Marion wondered when he had put the shirt on. He didn't remember choosing to wear it.

"That is none of your concern boy." Blackhart answered, to which the teenager grinned.

"Then he's important. Get him and the Chieftain, alive if possible- dead if necessary."

Marion shook his head and said to Blackhart, "I should have warned you about my bad luck."

Blackhart looked briefly at Marion, who was shocked at how sad the man's face suddenly looked, "If this is your idea of bad luck, then I hope you are never forced to experience mine."

The Knights charged and Blackhart's warriors charged. They clashed and crashed together like hurricane of muscle and bone. Blackhart himself was a stone in the river, unmoved by the current- a mountain that ignored the wind. Anything hostile that made the mistake of getting too close was crushed and rendered inert by precise strikes from strong hands holding sharp knives. Marion was the river, flowing through the chaos of the battle as though he had no substance and then dashing the unwary against the rocks as needed. Marion was pleased and horrified to realize that this was becoming normal for him.

The young teenager, Mordred, was like an eagle plucking salmon from the current of the river. Bursting into the melee with a short silver spear and impaling a warrior and then withdrawing from the chaos to

strike again. Mordred and his knights outnumbered Blackhart and his warriors, but the ranks of the knights quickly began to thin out.

"Hah, they are like their King's namesake! They depend upon numbers and not skill to take the day!" Blackhart yelled in the melee.

"Not all of us!" Mordred snapped and was suddenly lunging and stabbing like a eagle might strike the surface of the river.

Blackhart was blocking and murdering two different knights at that moment, and both his weapons were occupied. Marion flowed into the space between Blackhart and Mordred, not entirely sure why he was defending a man who had openly indicated that he would use Marion for his own purposes, but defending Blackhart nonetheless. Mordred was fast and Marion was unable to position himself perfectly to defend the blow either, but his positioning proved acceptable. Marion used the hafts of both tomahawks to slam against the point of the spear and knock both spear and Mordred off balance, preventing Mordred from withdrawing as he had previously. The boy collided with Marion and the two of them tumbled to the ground amidst the growing pile of corpses. As Marion fell he found himself thinking that a pile of corpses on the ground was a somewhat redundant statement. After all, the dirt is made of corpses, really old corpses. Marion landed and the dead bodies prevented him from rolling with the fall and he found himself winded from the landing and struggling to catch his breath. He looked around to try and place the position of Mordred who would- he was certain- be readying another attack. The boy seemed the aggressive type, much more so than Fitzroy. As Marion looked for Mordred, he suddenly caught sight of something that knocked him out of his flow. Staring back at him from amidst the other corpses was his own body, clearly dead with a horrible spear wound through the throat that had very nearly separated his head from his body. Marion instinctively scrambled back and bumped into another of his corpses, this time the blow that had killed him was a sword slash that had opened him up from shoulder to abdomen. Around him, he could see half a dozen other corpses with his face staring up at him from the ground. His brain couldn't process what he was seeing and he felt panic rising up in his throat like bad tacos, when suddenly he noticed Mordred clawing his way towards Marion across the Pile of corpses and the battle snapped back into focus. Marion found the ground beneath his feet and pushed himself up to standing, knocking the teenager's clumsy spear attack backwards as he rose.

One of the older Knights saw what was happening and cried out, "The Prince is in danger! Call for aid! Call the Bone Man!"

"Our Lord is not here." A younger knight answered. "He has passed through the Shadows. I do not know how to send word to him through the Shadows."

"I know." The elder Knight answered, he paused as though in thought and then said, "Guard me as I do the ritual."

Marion watched as the elder Knight performed a series of hand motions like he was warding off evil. The knight finished by spreading his arms with his hands positioned palms up and his face turned to the sky. Marion felt something change, a connection formed between the knight and elsewhere or elsewhen. Marion could not tell what passed between the Knight and whatever he had connected to, but he felt the connection.

Marion kicked Mordred hard in the chest as the boy tried to rise to his feet, knocking him back into the growing pile of corpses. he quickly backed out of the melee, easily dispatching two knights as he retreated.

"Well monkey see, monkey do." Marion said to himself, "If they can send messages to their boss, maybe I can send messages to Harley."

Marion put himself into the same mindset he used to call the tomahawks and repeated the hands motions he had seen the knight perform, ending in the palm up position. He felt the connection opening and reached out to whatever it was- grasping for contact until finally the connection formed. Marion was hit was a wave of emotion that he could only describe as dismissal or disdain.

"I was not expecting a second transmission, especially not from the Dreamer," The Bone Man said into Marion's mind. The shock of hearing the Bone Man nearly jolted Marion out of the connection. "You fight with the Lion I see. Be careful Dreamer. Even the Lion can be corrupted if it falls victim to fear."

"I'm not afraid of you." Marion answered.

"You are separated from your other half. Fear springs from separation. Perhaps you trust the tribe? Trust your allies? But you will always be outmatched. We are the Locust, we are the swarm and we do not fight alone."

Marion pushed back in his mind against the disdain, reaching out to see where the connection led. He had a glimpse of Harley and the kids trapped in the goblin while a pitch black dog or wolf stalked towards them.

"You have seen enough Dreamer. This ends." And Marion felt himself being forced back to the battlefield, and he saw the battle still whirling beside him, but as he brought himself back he saw the suspicious eyes of Blackhart staring at him and burning like embers in a campfire.

"What are you doing?" Blackhart demanded, trying to push through the whirl of combat to reach Marion, "Why are you calling for the Locust King's troops? Are you another of his puppets? Like Myrddhin or Morrigan? Curse You!"

"We're not done yet Savage." Mordred said, stepping between Blackhart and his path to Marion.

Marion smiled in spite of himself, "You're right about one thing." He called to Blackhart as he began to run, "Your luck is worse than mine."

"This is not over city wizard!" Blackhart yelled as he engaged Mordred in battle.

Marion ran until his lung burned, his legs ached, his abs screamed in pain, and his feet were lead weights. The plains stretched out in nearly all directions. The sun was setting in what Marion assumed was roughly the west. He couldn't be sure as to whether he was in the northern or southern hemisphere, or in fact whether this place had a northern or southern hemisphere. So, he could only say that the sun was setting roughly to the west and not northwest or southwest. And thus roughly to the west he could also see mountains edging purple in the far distance. And now that he was not running for his life, Marion could also see a huge sparkling tower of some sort, crystalline or glass far off in what Marion assumed was the east.

"If this is a vision or a dream," Marion said gasping for breath, "Why does everything hurt so much?"

He stopped and took an appraisal of his situation. He was trapped in this alternate world again, this time on purpose by the Bone Man: somebody who was overtly working against Marion. That same Bone Man was also apparently hunting his best friend and the kids they were now protecting, using some sort of ghost or shadow dog.

"Right, so if he trapped me here, then it's because I could help. So I need to help. How might I be able to help them? Well I can call the tomahawks. The Bone Man said I was waking up to my role in the story, so what? That probably means Harley can do this too, but I've figured out how to do more of this stuff than he is. That would make me more of a threat to them recapturing Maia and Fitzroy, which seems to be what they want. Okay. So I have to figure out how to use my powers, do I call them powers? Is that the right word? Maybe, who knows? Alright, so I need to connect back to the real world, if the other world is the real world. And I did that before, I mean okay, I got the Bone Man and not Harley, but I saw Harley. So let's try that again."

Again Marion went through the motions he had seen the knight perform and reached out with the same feeling as previous. A little more familiar with the process Marion noticed this time that there were more potential connections that what was immediately obvious. This time Marion tried to reach out and seek not just any connection, but to feel for sympathetic connections and found that he could feel the difference in demeanour of the connections that he could feel. He found a connection that felt gentle and grasped it.

"Can you hear me?" Marion projected into the connection.

"Marion? is that you dear?" The voice answered, and Marion recognized the presence. It was Mrs. Trilby, "I thought the boys Mrs. Boots described, sounded like you and your boyfriend."

"Harley is not my boyfriend Mrs. Trilby. Harley is straight."

"Oh, that's a shame. You would have made such a cute couple dear."

"Mrs. Trilby, if I can talk to you, then I'm assuming you're part of the story and I need your help. I'm the Dreamer."

"Oh. I'm so sorry dear. I was so hoping that it was a brain tumour Storytellers don't live very long these days, none of the main characters do. It's so much better to be a supporting character. You do the minimum the plot requires and stay out of the way. We lost so long ago, and nobody has resurrected our story in over a century. Only a few tribes in remote corners still live our story. The rest of us hear it second hand if we hear it at all."

"Mrs. Trilby, the Bone Man has trapped my in another world and a big black ghost dog is hunting Harley in the real world. I need your help."

"Oh dear. The Hound. You can't stop the hound dear. It smells fear, you know."

"Can I slow it down or distract it?"

"You could sic a familiar on it. Maybe an astral projection or a summoned holographic form of it."

"What does that mean?" Marion asked.

"I could let you throw ghost version of Mercer at him. It would slow down the hound, but it would make it angry too."

"So we'd be delaying it, but making thing worse in the long run?"

"Pretty much dear."

"That's been our working strategy so far, why change it now? What do I do?"

"Call for aid, dear. Just call for aid from people who care. You do not fight alone dear. Tell them that. Trust your allies."

Marion nodded, "I've heard that before. Ok,"

He reached out with the connection seeking Harley. When he found a connection that felt right, he raised his voice within the connection and cried out, "We do not fight alone! Trust your allies! Call for aid! I call for aid!"

Verse Eight: Exit, Pursued by Hound

"Did that work, do you think?" Marion asked Mrs Trilby, his neighbour from his old life and also apparently, a secret witch.

"I don't know dear, You've got the Bone Man watching them and to look closer would draw his attention back to you and back to me. I'm not the Storyteller, I'm just one of the witches. We don't have the power

the main characters in the story have. We meddle and sting the enemy, we delay and obscure, we mentor the heroes. But the story doesn't give us enough power to actually change things, and any of us who do seek greater power, almost inevitably end up villains corrupted by the Locust King or one of the old ones; or else something goes horribly wrong."

"I don't understand what you mean. A witch sounds pretty powerful."

"It does, doesn't it? But look at the stories. We give warnings or omens, we provide weapons or charms or spells. We act as mentors and gatekeepers. The Lady of the Lake giving Arthur Excalibur or Obi-Won Kenobi giving Luke his lightsaber, that's the sort of thing the story set us up to do."

"I thought Arthur drew the sword from the stone?"

"It depends on the story dear. In some versions one happened, in other versions the other happened," Mrs. Trilby said, "In some versions, Arthur had two swords and both happened: a sword of war and a sword of peace. I have no idea what a sword of peace could be. Bizarre idea. But the point is, we're helpers and testers, tricksters and betrayers, but never on a grand scale. Since the fall of the story, we've worked to hinder the Locust King and his empire, little acts of disobedience and sabotage. Grand heroic quests are the purview of the young. If you survive long enough to grow old, you might end up a witch or a wizard when somebody replaces you as Dreamer. "

"Speaking of survival, how do I do that? What's next? The kids say that we need to meet the Witch Doctor. The problem is that I don't know who he is, let alone where he is. Is he a witch?"

"No dear." Mrs. Trilby paused and hummed a bit, as though considering how to word things, "He's exactly like you, a storyteller. Only further along in the story. Your friend is looking for him, but you boys don't know how to find him, so you'll need guides. There's the Bonelands and the Shadowlands. And he's not in the Shadowlands where you're walking right now so that's a problem. I can sense you and your friends on the witch road right now, little points of magnetic force under my iron pendulum. You'll need help. Witches or wizards to guide you. I can only do so much from here. You should find locals. Witches don't disappear, they adapt."

"Wait. What's the difference between a wizard and a witch? And what do you mean further along the story? So am I trapped in a different story then?" Marion asked.

"No dear, it's all the same story. But the story is very big. It's like a globe, you can't lay it flat to form a single accurate picture of the world. Every map distorts things a little. It's the same thing with the story dear. We must view it from different angles, from different points of view."

"Okay. Can I ask something really big then. We've been running none stop and people have been describing what's happening to us as a story. Why? What does that mean?"

"We tell stories dear. Humans do. We tell them to make sense of the world, and through these stories we anticipate the world and adapt to it and survive in it. My cats, and any other predators, see the future, or rather guess the future. And of course a guess is just a story about what we think shall happen. It's how we control our experience of the world. And when people get together, they tell bigger stories that explain how those people decide the world ought to be. And everyone who lives in that group, that tribe has to work within the story that the group agrees upon, whether they like it or not. If they really object, they either have to try to change the story or leave the group. The Locust King changed the story, but then he went and grew an empire across all the other stories. Nobody could leave his story, there was virtually nowhere that his story didn't dominate the landscape. We were all trapped in his story. And when we enter somebody's life, we enter their story and fill a role within that story. When we act in opposition to somebody's story, we become their enemy or their villain or their monster in the dark. And so everyone who told the old story was either corrupted, destroyed or transformed into a villain. The lucky few manage to escape the reach of the Locust King's story. When we step outside somebody's story, we confound them and become invisible. "

"So, the world will be transformed into something better if Harley and I help Maia and Fitzroy do their thing?"

"No dear, the world sustained by the old story will be freed. To steal a metaphor, it will be resurrected after dying at the hands of the empire. Oh my. Listen to my. I've gone and internalized my cover story. Now isn't that a thing?"

"How do I help Harley and the gang find the witches?"

"Well you're straddling the light and the shadow right now, you're almost certainly broadcasting, probably mumbling like an old prophet, I shouldn't wonder. So they might know already, but keep talking dear, that will up the odds. You should stop talking to me though. These calls aren't untraceable and the land your in is completely under the thrall of the Locust King, you're in his house and he has eyes everywhere. Good Luck dear, call me when you're able and try not to get killed too horribly."

* * *

"We've been driving all day. And pretty much all of last night too. We need to sleep." Harley said, as the goblin bounced over rocks and slight ruts that Fitzroy swore up and down were roads. In the back, Marion mumbled in the driver's seat mostly unintelligibly.

"I can still feel the hound." Fitzroy said uncertainly, "I can't tell how close though. I can't see the hound, only the rippled on the witch road when it distorts things. Its not too close, but its still coming."

"Marion's talking about the witch road," Maia said from the back seat.

"What's he saying?" Harley asked without looking back, "I can't hear him from up here."

"He's talking about how we need to find witches to guide us on the witch road."

"I haven't heard anything about witches before this," Harley answered, "Doesn't he mean the witch doctor guy?"

"He isn't saying witch doctor, he's just saying witches."

"More complications." Harley said, his voice neutral.

* * *

Marion looked at the farm, corn stalks were wreathed in bean shoots crawling upwards and he could see squash growing at the base of the stalks. the pale wendigo seemed undecided as to whether they should gorge themselves on the clearly not yet ripe crops or attempt to feast upon the couple wielding pitchfork and shovel to ward keep the wendigo away from the two children huddling against the wall of the cottage. Marion guessed that the family was part of the Locust King's empire from their clothes, which had a distinctly medieval peasant look, and that they would probably attack him as soon as he dispatched the wendigo. But still, the children were terrified and Marion couldn't stand by.

"I'm getting to be a regular superhero." He muttered to himself, calling the tomahawks into his hands. "I need a freaking cape and logo."

Marion reached out and felt the flow, flow he was starting to suspect related to the story and probably the plot. He felt the flow and connected with it, let it draw him up and guide him like wind. And then he was moving, running down the hill, a hurricane with twin tomahawks.

The family saw him coming, and he could see that they were unsure if he was there to help them or make things worse. The Wendigo did not see Marion until it was far to late.

* * *

The Bone Man stared at the knight who had initiated the ritual and shook his head, only once, then said, "Your failure has compromised the operation and has damaged my standing with the King. He is sending additional troops, Knights of Unity, not ours. And he is calling the Princeling home. To learn, he says. We have disappointed him. We cannot falter again. Failure cannot happen again."

"Of course not sir" the knight said, his words rushing out and tripping over themselves in their hurry.

"Then we are in agreement. I am pleased that you understand. Your replacement will be inspired by the lesson I hope. Now close your eyes and think of the empire."

As the Bone Man spoke, the face of the knight transformed from a tense smile to an open mouthed gape. He seemed to attempt to speak, but never managed to find the words. And finally, as the Bone Man stopped speaking, he simply nodded and closed his eyes.

The other knights turned to look away.

A scream of pain pierced the silence. And then the Bone Man spoke, "we are pure once more. Onwards."

* * *

The Wendigo lay dead, piled outside the fenced off garden and now attracting flies. The family Marion had saved, consisting of Ana Lee and her husband Johnboy and their twin daughters Edie and Ellie, had not turned on Marion after the confrontation was over. Rather, they had invited him in and served him a meal of polenta, their last winter squash, refried beans and something that they claimed was beef but tasted like venison. Marion had not seen any cows outside. A small fenced enclosure held pigs. Another small coop housed chickens that had run free before the Wendigo found them. The handful of survivors

now huddled in the coop in fear. But Marion had not seen any evidence of cows on the tiny homestead. He had seen a wooded area up the hill to the south.

Marion didn't ask why they would tell him that venison was beef. He could guess. They thanked him. And the girls, who were maybe five, asked him all sorts of questions that he deflected so as not to scare them. The cabin was a one room affair with a kitchen area and a sleeping area and not much else save for an altar in the west facing corner. Two corn husk dolls sat upon the altar, and initially, Marion had thought they were just toys.

Upon a second viewing, Marion noticed that the dolls were positioned as part of a diorama. The corn husk dolls were of male and female design. The woman was depicted with an enormous spider and spreading web behind her, all made of wood and corn husks and twine. The man was depicted with a huge corn husk serpent coiling around him. The serpent had heads at both ends of its body, depicted with the skulls of lizards.

Johnboy saw Marion staring and moved his large body to block Marion's view.

"I thought you guys served the Locust King? Aren't those..."

"The Knights of Purity knocked down all the old standing stones and burned all the old ancestor poles. The Knights of Unity made sure anyone who survived the war joined the empire, and the Knights of Purity made sure that anyone who don't join was never seen again. You serve the King in public or you get purified. What you do in private, you don't talk about." Johnboy said.

"Stories go into hiding. People are still telling the story, but the community isn't. I wonder what that means?" Marion mused out loud.

"It means you're thinking thoughts that are going to get you killed."

"I'm a dreamer, that's what I do." Marion answered, and watched both Johnboy and his wife stiffen.

"You need to go, now." Ana Lee said, standing and wringing her hands.

"You're afraid I'll put you at risk." Marion said.

"I'm afraid we've put you at risk. The empire, watches at best it can. If you are within the bounds of its story, it will see you. The altar is not their story, inside the four walls of our home, the empire is likely blind, but our farm outside belongs to the empire. It almost certainly knows you are here, and will have sensed what you are. You need to run."

"Will you be okay? If it knows who I am?"

"Only if it thinks we know as well. We will hide our altar, and do as we always do. Big players like the King and the Chieftains and the Prince strut about acting like they know more than they do. The rest of us survive by acting like we know less than we do. Now run."

Marion ran. He wasn't sure for how long, but it felt like an hour or more. Marion couldn't accurately gauge time in this world. He didn't look back until he reached wooded hill. When he looked back the farm was in flames and tiny figures in white were swarming across the burning farmstead.

* * *

The campfire sputtered as Maia slept curled in the front seat of the Cricket. Marion was still stuffed in the back of the Cricket and still muttering. Fitzroy and Harley sat by the campfire at yet another government camp grounds trying to look normal to the few other families camping. They had chosen the most isolated spot and were trying to rest as best they could. The camp site was spartan. They had a bucket, provided by the camp grounds, filled with water to put out the fire. The site had a fire pit, but no picnic table. They had one sleeping bag, no tent and no camp stove or cooler.

Harley was trying not to doze off, and hoping Fitzroy might finally be able to sleep when Marion's muttering rose back to an audible level.

"You're afraid I'll put you at risk." Marion said in a worried tone.

Maia climbed out of the Cricket, "Mr. Marion's talking again." She said as she walked over to Harley.

"I heard," Harley acknowledged, "It doesn't sound good either."

The campfire suddenly flared and began coalescing into a vaguely human form. Maia ducked under the Cricket as the flames rose. Harley stood up to face the fire.

"Somebody has left the phone off the hook." A voice in the flame said, "Inexperience, I imagine. That must be a problem for your side. Mortality is not an asset in a game played over such a long time. We remain and learn how best to win. You die of conflict or simple age and must relearn each time. How will you beat us?"

"Who's there?" Fitzroy asked looking up

"I am not here. But let us speak in any case. I have chased you. And thus far you have eluded me. But you cannot escape me. Every slip, every error and I draw closer."

The image in the flames came clear and the Bone Man stood looking at Harley and Fitzroy. The night seemed to deepen around the campfire and soon Harley could not see anything outside the, now white hot, glow of the fire. The howl of the hound sounded just outside the circle of light. Again the howl sounded, the same distance away but from a different angle.

"It's circling us." Fitzroy said, putting a hand to his head in obvious pain.

"I am keeping it at bay for you, not out of generosity, but to make an offer. You may accept my offer, and I shall draw you to me. Or, you may turn it down, and I will let the hound in."

"I doubt we'll like the offer." Harley said.

"Does that mean you refuse?"

"I didn't say that. We'll listen." Harley answered.

"My offer is simple. Step out of the story, and allow the hound to deal with the children. Do this and you will be allowed to go free, and we will even reward you. Power, wealth, success, your lives back and more. We can give you a purity of meaning to your life that you currently lack, a direction and a focus- a real mission and not this meandering flight to nothing."

Fitzroy looked apprehensively at Harley who had been listening quietly. Harley shook his head.

"I've listened to you, but I'm not interested in wealth or success at the cost of my honour and self-respect, and Marion would say the same if he were lucid."

The Bone Man closed his eyes and tilted his head skyward for a moment and then returned to staring at Harley, "Then consider the other part of the offer. Amnesty. Your life back. You won't die. You won't be arrested for kidnapping and murder of federal agents and the increasingly horrifying list of charges your world has laid upon your mortal shoulders."

Harley turned away from the Bone Man and from Fitzroy and clasped his hands behind his back. He looked down at the ground in silence.

Fitzroy watched silently. The Bone Man watched Fitzroy with an expression that Fitzroy could only classify as hunger.

"Your days of rebellion are all but finished boy. We always win." The Bone Man said to Fitzroy as Harley stood silently inspecting the earth in front of his feet.

Fitzroy shook his head, "You haven't caught us yet."

"Your nanny will see my logic. Surrender is better than the fangs of the Hound and the oblivion it offers."

"Oblivion doesn't scare me," Harley said, turning back around, "That's what I expect to greet me when I die. Why should I fear what is, by definition, nothing? It takes a pretty big ego to fear non-existence."

"You may not fear death," The Bone Man said, crossing his arms, "But surely you fear the dying, as the hound tears your essence to pieces and destroys you little by little."

"We aren't agreeing to your offer." Harley said, shaking his head as the hound howled just outside the light, "I listened. I told you I would, I'm nice that way. But I didn't hear a reasonable offer. So no, I'm not accepting your offer."

"Then I guess I must let the hound in."

"I guess you will."

"You won't!" Maia yelled as she scrambled out from under the Cricket and grabbed the water bucket.

The Bone Man looked down at her in surprise as she flung the whole bucket onto the fire with a defiant hiss. Smoke billowed and the Bone Man began to fade from view. He smiled.

"You have no weapons that can hurt the hound. You cannot run from hound. This changes nothing. It will follow the smell of your fear wherever you run."

As the fire died, the outside light seemed to return, seeping back in like a cautious puppy afraid of being kicked. One corner remained dark, the light sucked from the area by the hound as it stood across the dying fire from Harley.

"Any ideas guys?" Harley asked.

"Run for the Cricket?" Maia said.

Harley looked back at the Cricket to see the cab and hood caked in glittering white frost.

"I don't think that's an option." He said.

"Have you noticed?" Fitzroy said, "They way people talk about the Hound?"

The hound growled.

"You mean that you can't run?" Harley asked.

"has anyone tried not running?" Fitzroy asked.

At this the hound stopped and cocked its head.

"I think that if they did, they eliminated themselves from the pool of people who are able to talk about the hound." Harley said.

"But everyone is telling us that this is a story. Because what if the person who didn't run was one of the main characters?"

"Main characters can die, Fitzroy. Every tells us that too. Why would you even try?" Harley said.

"Because then you'll have time to get me sister out of here." Fitzroy said and then he stepped over the cooling embers of the fire towards the hound.

The hound took cautious step back as the teenager marched forward, fists clenched and knees shaking. The hound howled again and Fitzroy's pace stuttered, but then he steadied himself and kept advancing. harley watched and Fitzroy seemed to have an aura around him, as though he were drawing up or emanating some sort of power. The hound howled again, and Harley though the howl sounded off, maybe a little desperate. Fitzroy closed on the hound's position and the hound looked around and then when it seemed convinced that Fitzroy wasn't stopping it began frantically backing up, front legs stumbling over back legs as the teenaged boy bore down on the now terrified creature of shadow and darkness.

"You can't eat me!" Fitzroy yelled, a little shrilly, "I'm not afraid of you!"

Harley wasn't sure he believed what he was hearing from Fitzroy, but the hound finally turned and scrambled away tail between it's legs. Harley shook his head.

Fitzroy turned and walked back towards the campsite, but Harley noted that he seemed winded and staggered a little bit as he walked.

"I guess I am one of the main characters." Fitzroy said as he walked up, "Because I just scared off the scariest thing I've ever seen."

"You did good." Harley said, watching the teen closely.

"I feel a little fried though, kind of used up." He staggered again, and harley stepped towards him, catching Fitzroy as he started to fall.

"Fitz!" Maia cried as Harley caught him.

"I think I need to rest a minute, because things are getting awfully heavy, Fitzroy said, his pupils dilating as he spoke, "Because the Witch Road is getting really heavy. I think I'm sinking into it."

"Fitz?" Maia asked, running up beside them.

"He's spaced out. Like Marion I think." Harley said.

"No! He can't!" Maia cried, dropping to her knees before saying quietly, "He figured out how to find the witch doctor guy and he could see the witch road thing and now two of us are zombie guys and, and I need my brother, and I'm scared."

Harley needed both hands to carry Fitzroy and so he heaved the catatonic teen over to the Cricket and buckled him into the back seat. he kept an eye out for the Hound, but it didn't reappear. Closing the door, he heard Marion still mumbling about witches.

Harley shook his head, "Fine. Let's go find ourselves a witch."